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A STATE LEGISLATES IMPROVEMENT IN READING AND THE MILLER-UNRUH ACT.

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The state's role in reading instruction improvement in California is illustrated by the Miller-Unruh Reading Act of 1965 which aims to prevent and correct reading disabilities at the elementary school level and to provide funds and services for special reading instruction. It requires that the Stanford Reading Test be given in May each year to children in the primary grades in all school districts of California. Funds and services should be awarded on the basis of greatest need and least financial ability. Reading specialists must be nominated and must pass an examination on reading instruction and theories for certification. The different school systems, the initiation of crash programs, the adoption of phonics-oriented textbooks, statewide interest in reading instruction, the improvement and growth of college reading courses, the improvement of reading instruction, awareness of individual differences and needs, and the availability of funds to needy schools are discussed in relation to the act. (NS)

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"A State Legislates Improvement in Reading and the Miller-Unruh Act"

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RE 001 419

PART I -- THE MILLER-UNRUH READING ACT

INTRODUCTION:

In this spring of 1968, California is the state of the "Three R's": Reagan, Rafferty, and Reading! In his constant attacks upon higher education, Governor Reagan may so destroy the university system that we won't have to train readers for college preparation. Would-be "Senator" Rafferty, as the current state superintendent of education, makes the teaching of reading by phonics instruction something on a par with motherhood, apple pie, and the American flag--such a black-and-white procedure that will cure all of

California's supposed reading ills. State legislators release to the newspapers district-by-district reading test results that cause an uninformed public to compare school systems unfairly.

Even though this particular combination of the "Three R's" creates much political involvement in education, it does serve an important purpose: intensive occupation of an entire state in the teaching of reading. In spite of its critics, the Miller-Unruh Reading Act of 1965 has certainly caused statewide interest in reading instruction--and this is undoubtedly good for the profession.

THE ACT AND ITS PURPOSES:

On July 14, 1965, Governor Edmund Brown signed the Miller-Unruh Reading Act, authored by Senator George Miller and Speaker of the Assembly Jesse Unruh, for special elementary school reading instruction programs.

According to the words of the Act, the intent and purpose of the law is "the prevention of reading disabilities and the correction of reading disabilities at the earliest possible time in the educational career of the pupil." The Act is directed toward reading success for pupils in the primary grades; and it provides funds for salary payments of reading specialists, for scholarships to develop teaching skill and for salary payments for employment of professional librarians.

TESTING:

All districts in the state are required to administer a reading test in grades one, two, and three, given in May of each year. The test used is the Stanford Reading Test. Results must be reported to Sacramento.

SPECIALIST TEACHER:

A major feature of the Act provides school districts with the opportunity to obtain specialist teachers of reading for the three primary grades. Special reading teachers who participate in the Miller-Unruh programs must hold a certificate, Specialist Teacher in Reading, issued by the State Department of Education. To obtain this certificate, a teacher must do three things: be nominated, pass an examination, and make application for the certificate.

The examination is given about three times each year in test centers throughout the state. The test, 105 minutes in duration, consists of 130 multiple-choice questions. Content of the test includes such items as grouping practices in the primary grades, methods for teaching beginning reading, linguistics, children's literature, testing and diagnosis, child growth and development, uses and values of keeping records, and research findings.

The Miller-Unruh reading specialist, once assigned, may help the school district in the following ways:

1. Working with primary grade children as individuals or in small groups (1-6 pupils)
2. Diagnosing disabilities
3. Organizing instruction to meet individual needs
4. Helping teachers through demonstrations or individual conferences
5. Conferencing with parents
6. Disseminating current reading research

FUNDING:

Since it is the intent of the legislature that funds and services should go first to those schools with the greatest needs and the least ability to provide for them, the law stipulates that approved applications for state aid will be placed on a priority list. In general, priorities will be based upon the relative financial ability of a district as measured by the assessed valuation per unit of average daily attendance and upon the relative needs for specialists as measured by the scores of pupils in the statewide testing program.

This paper, to this point, has presented factually the content and purposes of the Miller-Unruh Act, simply for the reader's understanding of one state legislature's concern for reading instruction. The remainder of this report furnishes critiques of the Act, aimed at an understanding of various implications of the effects of the Act upon the state's instructional program.

PART II -- CRITIQUES OF THE MILLER-UNRUH ACT

BACKGROUND:

CALIFORNIA is a place of tremendous and rapid population growth that results in people from many, varied backgrounds.

CALIFORNIA is a political unit of widely different geographic areas--large mountain counties of small population in the north, rich agricultural counties in the center, and one vast, heavily populated megalopolis that ranges from Santa Barbara to San Diego in the south.

CALIFORNIA is the home of a governor who was once a Hollywood actor and who still seems to exude that appeal to a national audience that considers him as a possible presidential candidate when he really hasn't proven in his own state that he has the qualities for heading the greatest nation in the world.

CALIFORNIA is the battleground for a state superintendent of education who is openly disliked by his professional peers but somehow has the ability to use the proper purple prose that gets him votes with the lay public.

CALIFORNIA is the domain of a state legislature that takes personal interest in education but seems to seek no advice from the professional educators.

CALIFORNIA is the state where a teacher may enter a first-grade classroom without ever having had a course in the teaching of reading.

CALIFORNIA is the spot in which the state reading association has the largest membership of any unit in the International Reading Association--and thus is a source for teachers who are eager for information that will aid them to help children better.

Put this amalgam of politics and education, of strong personalities and professional educators, of northerners and southerners, of Hollywood "kooks" and think-factory intellectuals, of phonics and look-say exponents--and you get what is probably the most challenging spot in the nation to be a teacher! In reactions to the Miller-Unruh Reading Act, you encounter as many viewpoints as there are groups reacting.

PUBLISHED TEST RESULTS:

In February 1968 an unprecedented disclosure of reading test scores showed that suburban districts generally outperform rural and urban areas in the state and that San Francisco's suburbs do better than those in other parts of the state.

In the test of first-grade reading, Southern California, with the bulk of the state's students, placed only

one district in the top ten (San Marino Unified in Los Angeles County). The other nine were districts in Contra Costa, Marin, San Mateo, and Santa Clara counties, all in the north.

This district-by-district ranking, produced by a state assemblyman and published by the press, naturally resulted in comparisons. But how many newspaper readers can be counted upon to ask. . .

1. What about the exposure of children in middle-class suburban areas to books and culture in the first six years of their lives?
2. What about large class size in some urban areas?
3. What about the cultural disadvantages of ghetto children in Negro and Mexican-American neighborhoods?
4. What about the pre-service and in-service training of teachers?

EDUCATORS' REACTIONS:

As measured by the Stanford Reading Tests, California pupils in grades one, two, and three showed to disadvantage in relation to the publisher's test norms. Results indicated that first graders, on the average, are three months behind national

norms. They showed that 90% of the state's 1,150+ school districts qualify for state funds to hire specialist teachers of reading and that 77% of the districts would qualify for supplementary aid beyond that based on the proportion of their pupils showing need for special help.

The state association of school administrators, after study of the test scores, recommended the following:

1. In evaluating California pupils, a test should be used which closely approximates California curriculum.
2. Since Ginn & Company and Allyn & Bacon have provided the state with basic readers, the content of those readers should be carefully compared with the test items to determine if we are testing what we are teaching.
3. Since California has a late-starting reading program compared to Midwest and Eastern schools on which the Stanford test was largely standardized, research needs to be done to determine the relationship of timing in the teaching of reading to achievement on the test.

LOS ANGELES CITY:

The Los Angeles City Unified District, with 43% minority population, ranked at the lowest levels in the first-grade test. As a result, the city has been in an uproar, with the press, the public, and Dr. Rafferty all offering easy panaceas.

A spokesman for a group of Los Angeles parents stated, " 'Armies of illiterates' march the corridors of public educational institutions because phonetics are not taught in the elementary schools." Dr. Rafferty even said on a television interview, after Los Angeles city results were announced, "Aha! See, I told you so! They haven't been teaching phonics!"

California is going through state adoption procedures this year for reading textbooks. Every one of the books which survived the first elimination is phonics-oriented. Jeanne Chall, in LEARNING TO READ, the Carnegie-sponsored study now receiving so much notice, provides Dr. Rafferty with even more ammunition about phonics instruction.

Because of the pressures put upon it, Los Angeles City has embarked upon a crash program by spending huge sums on phonics materials for the primary classroom.

COLLEGE TRAINING:

California institutions have been notoriously lax in offering training for teachers of reading. One of the largest universities in the world, UCLA, until very recently didn't even have one course offering in reading! It has been possible for a beginning first-grade teacher to enter the field without ever having had any training in the teaching of reading. When all of the twenty-seven studies of beginning reading made by the

United States Office of Education revealed that the one variable in all of them was the teacher who apparently made the difference, it would certainly behoove the state of California and the entire nation to concentrate its financial rewards upon the human teacher, with a de-emphasis upon materials and machines as ready answers.

On the plus side, it is now commendable to note that thirty-three California colleges and universities offer a total of 193 courses in reading!

CALIFORNIA READING ASSOCIATION:

The California Reading Association, the state council of the International Reading Association, published in 1967 a position paper on reading instruction in the state. This paper stands for a sane approach to the teaching of reading based upon all of the research in the field.

Not yet two years old, the organization has had little impact upon the state. In the years ahead, it hopes to become actively involved in influencing the legislature to establish IRA minimum standards for training reading teachers and specialists. The profession deplores the idea that anyone in the state can now be certified a reading specialist by passing a 130-item multiple-choice test! Fortunately, California is filled with thousands of teachers who care enough about upgrading their own training to enroll in the 193 courses being offered by the colleges.

At its annual state conferences, the California Reading Association has about 3,000 people attending. Even the local Orange County Council of IRA gets more than 700 teachers at its annual conference! Almost every known reading specialist with a state reputation is constantly busy on consultant assignments with school districts seeking help. Teachers show they care in the ways in which they seek all of this aid they can get in helping their pupils.

CALIFORNIA TEACHERS ASSOCIATION:

In its state publication, the powerful California Teachers Association made statements that reflect much professional maturity:

1. That the public and the profession take a dispassionate look at the problem.
2. That instead of negating some of the test results through some rationalizations, it would be more practical to assume that California teachers cannot, and will not, ever be satisfied with the teaching of reading.
3. That it is questionable logic to lengthen the school day and year, without a careful analysis of the efficiency with which time now available is utilized.

4. That research does not clearly support the method of "phonics" over "look-say" and that instead the method must be adapted to the individual learning style of the pupil.
5. That the teacher must have flexibility in the use of time; he must be free to select methods based on reliable research and adjusted to individual differences; and he must have direct access to meaningful in-service education.

CONCLUSION

Thus stands the state of reading instruction in California today. It's good, it's bad. It's "phonics," it's "look-say." It's professional involvement, it's public pressure. Most important of all, it's not indifference. California is a place for the young-in-heart. If rapid change--even from day to day--is bothersome to a teacher, California is not for him.

It is true that the Miller-Unruh Act has pitted politician against educator, has caused taxpayers to compare school systems, has forced some school districts to inaugurate crash programs, and has undoubtedly influenced a phonics-oriented textbook adoption for this year--but look at the values of such statewide involvement:

1. The intense interest of everyone in the state in reading instruction.

2. The growth of reading courses offered by colleges.
3. The upgrading of instruction that almost has to result from such extensive focus.
4. The awareness of individual differences and needs in instruction.
5. The monies available to school districts for services they couldn't otherwise afford.
6. The improvements that will undoubtedly occur in upper grades because of the attention given now to the primary grades.

The current controversies brought about by the Miller-Unruh Reading Act may often be frustrating, but they have brought total involvement on a statewide basis--and isn't that what Marshall McLuhan says the 20th century is all about?

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(Note: These references are provided for the reader who may wish to pursue in more detail various aspects of this paper.)

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